

THE EARTH COMPELS

by the same author

★ .

POEMS

OUT OF THE PICTURE

THE EARTH COMPELS

poems by
LOUIS MACNEICE

Faber and Faber Limited
24 Russell Square
London

*First published in April MCMXXVIII
by Faber and Faber Limited
24 Russell Square London W.C. 1
Printed in Great Britain by
R. MacLehose and Company Limited
The University Press Glasgow
All rights reserved*

To
NANCY

Contents

CARRICKFERGUS	<i>page 7</i>
JUNE THUNDER	9
THE SUNLIGHT ON THE GARDEN	10
CHESS	11
THE HEATED MINUTES	12
ICELAND	13
SOLVITUR ACRIS HIEMS	16
PASSAGE STEAMER	17
CIRCUS	18
HOMAGE TO CLICHÉS	22
ON THOSE ISLANDS	25
ECLOGUE FROM ICELAND	29
ECLOGUE BETWEEN THE MOTHERLESS	40
LEAVING BARRA	47
HIDDEN ICE	49
TAKEN FOR GRANTED	50
THANK YOU	51
BOOKS, DO NOT LOOK AT ME	52
ONLY LET IT FORM	53
NOW THAT THE SHAPES OF MIST	54
CHRISTMAS SHOPPING	55
BAGPIPE MUSIC	58
RUGBY FOOTBALL EXCURSION	60
EPILOGUE	62

Acknowledgments are due to the editors of *The Criterion*, *The Listener*, *The London Mercury*, *New Verse* and *New Writing*, for permission to reprint some of these poems. Also to Messrs. Faber & Faber Limited, publishers of 'Letters from Iceland', and to Messrs. Longmans, Green & Co. Limited, publishers of 'I Crossed the Minch'.

δυσέρωτες δὴ φαινόμεθ' ὄντες
τοῦδ' ὃ τι τοῦτο στίλβει κατὰ γῆν

Carrickfergus

I was born in Belfast between the mountain and the
gantries

To the hooting of lost sirens and the clang of trams:
Thence to Smoky Carrick in County Antrim
Where the bottle-neck harbour collects the mud which
jams

The little boats beneath the Norman castle,
The pier shining with lumps of crystal salt;
The Scotch Quarter was a line of residential houses
But the Irish Quarter was a slum for the blind and halt.

The brook ran yellow from the factory stinking of
chlorine,
The yarn-mill called its funeral cry at noon;
Our lights looked over the lough to the lights of Bangor
Under the peacock aura of a drowning moon.

✓ The Norman walled this town against the country
To stop his ears to the yelping of his slave
And built a church in the form of a cross but denoting
The list of Christ on the cross, in the angle of the nave.

I was the rector's son, born to the anglican order,
Banned for ever from the candles of the Irish poor;
The Chichesters knelt in marble at the end of a transept
With ruffs about their necks, their portion sure.

The war came and a huge camp of soldiers
Grew from the ground in sight of our house with long
Dummies hanging from gibbets for bayonet practice
And the sentry's challenge echoing all day long;

June Thunder

The Junes were free and full, driving through tiny
Roads, the mudguards brushing the cowparsley,
Through fields of mustard and under boldly embattled
Mays and chestnuts

Or between beeches verdurous and voluptuous
Or where broom and gorse beflagged the chalkland—
All the flare and gusto of the unenduring
Joys of a season

Now returned but I note as more appropriate
To the maturer mood impending thunder
With an indigo sky and the garden hushed except for
The treetops moving.

Then the curtains in my room blow suddenly inward,
The shrubbery rustles, birds fly heavily homeward,
The white flowers fade to nothing on the trees and rain comes
Down like a dropscene.

Now there comes the catharsis, the cleansing downpour
Breaking the blossoms of our overdated fancies
Our old sentimentality and whimsicality
Loves of the morning.

Blackness at half-past eight, the night's precursor,
Clouds like falling masonry and lightning's lavish
Annunciation, the sword of the mad archangel
Flashed from the scabbard.

If only you would come and dare the crystal
Rampart of rain and the bottomless moat of thunder,
If only now you would come I should be happy
Now if now only.

The Sunlight on the Garden

The sunlight on the garden
Hardens and grows cold,
We cannot cage the minute
Within its nets of gold,
When all is told
We cannot beg for pardon.

Our freedom as free lances
Advances towards its end;
The earth compels, upon it
Sonnets and birds descend;
And soon, my friend,
We shall have no time for dances.

The sky was good for flying
Defying the church bells
And every evil iron
Siren and what it tells:
The earth compels,
We are dying, Egypt, dying

And not expecting pardon,
Hardened in heart anew,
But glad to have sat under
Thunder and rain with you,
And grateful too
For sunlight on the garden.

Chess

At the penultimate move, their saga nearly sung,
They have worked so hard to prove what lads they were
 when young,
Have looked up every word in order to be able to say
The gay address unheard when they were dumb and gay.
Your Castle to King's Fourth under your practised hand!
What is the practice worth, so few being left to stand?
Better the raw levies jostling in the square
Than two old men in a crevice sniping at empty air;
The veterans on the pavement puff their cheeks and blow
The music of enslavement that echoes back 'I told you so';
The chapped hands fumble flutes, the tattered posters cry
Their craving for recruits who have not had time to die.
While our armies differ they move and feel the sun,
The victor is a cypher once the war is won.
Choose your gambit, vary the tactics of your game,
You move in a closed ambit that always ends the same.

The Heated Minutes

The heated minutes climb
The anxious hill,
The tills fill up with cash,
The tiny hammers chime
The bells of good and ill,
And the world piles with ash
From fingers killing time.

If you were only here
Among these rocks,
I should not feel the dull
The taut and ticking fear
That hides in all the clocks
And creeps inside the skull—
If you were here, my dear.

Iceland

No shields now
 Cross the knoll,
The hills are dull
 With leaden shale,
Whose arms could squeeze
 The breath from time
And the climb is long
 From cairn to cairn.

Houses are few
 But decorous
In a ruined land
 Of sphagnum moss;
Corrugated iron
 Farms inherit
The spirit and phrase
 Of ancient sagas.

Men have forgotten
 Anger and ambush,
To make ends meet
 Their only business:
The lover riding
 In the lonely dale
Hears the plover's
 Single pipe

And feels perhaps
 But undefined
The drift of death
 In the sombre wind

Deflating the trim
 Balloon of lust
In a grey storm
 Of dust and grit.

So we who have come
 As trippers North
Have minds no match
 For this land's girth;
The glacier's licking
 Tongues deride
Our pride of life,
 Our flashy songs.

But the people themselves
 Who live here
Ignore the brooding
 Fear, the sphinx;
And the radio
 With tags of tune
Defies their pillared
 Basalt crags.

Whose ancestors
 Thought that at last
The end would come
 To a blast of horns
And gods would face
 The worst in fight,
Vanish in the night
 The last, the first

Night which began
Without device
In ice and rocks,
No shade or shape;
Grass and blood,
The strife of life,
Were an interlude
Which soon must pass

And all go back
Relapse to rock
Under the shawl
Of the ice-caps,
The cape which night
Will spread to cover
The world when the living
Flags are furled.

Solvitur Acris Hiems

(*Horace, Odes, I. 4*)

Winter to Spring: the west wind melts the frozen rancour,
The windlass drags to sea the thirsty hull;
Byre is no longer welcome to beast or fire to ploughman,
The field removes the frost-cap from his skull.

Venus of Cythera leads the dances under the hanging
Moon and the linked line of Nymphs and Graces
Beat the ground with measured feet while the busy Fire-
God
Stokes his red-hot mills in volcanic places.

Now is the time to twine the spruce and shining head with
myrtle,
Now with flowers escaped the earthy fetter,
And sacrifice to the woodland god in shady copses
A lamb or a kid, whichever he likes better.

Equally heavy is the heel of white-faced Death on the
pauper's
Shack and the towers of kings, and O my dear
The little sum of life forbids the ravelling of lengthy
Hopes. Night and the fabled dead are near

And the narrow house of nothing past whose lintel
You will meet no wine like this, no boy to admire
Like Lycidas who today makes all young men a furnace
And whom tomorrow girls will find a fire.

Passage Steamer

Upon the decks they take beef tea
Who are so free, so free, so free,
But down the ladder in the engine-room
(Doom, doom, doom, doom)
The great cranks rise and fall, repeat,
The great cranks plod with their Assyrian feet
To match the monotonous energy of the sea.

Back from a journey I require
Some new desire, desire, desire
But find in the open sea and sun
None, none, none, none;
The gulls that bank around the mast
Insinuate that nothing we pass is past,
That all our beginnings were long since begun.

And when I think of you, my dear,
Who were so near, so near, so near,
The barren skies from wall to wall
Appal, appal, pall, pall,
The spray no longer gilds the wave,
The sea looks nothing more nor less than a grave
And the world and the day are grey and that is all.

Circus

I

Perchists

Intricacy of engines,
Delicacy of darkness;
They rise into the tent's
Top like deep-sea divers

And hooked from the mouth like fish
Frame their frolic
Above the silent music
And the awed audience,

Hang by their teeth
Beneath the cone of canvas,
The ring beneath them
An eye that is empty

Who live in a world
Of aery technic
Like dolls or angels
Sexless and simple

Our fear their frame,
Hallowed by handclaps,
Honoured by eyes
Upward in incense.

On the tent's walls
Fourfold shadowed
In a crucifixion's
Endless moment

Intricacy of,
Delicacy of,
Darkness and engines.

II

Horses

The long whip lingers,
Toys with the sawdust;
The horses amble
On a disc of dreams.

The drumsticks flower
In pink percussion
To mix with the metal
Petals of brass.

The needle runs
In narrower circles;
The long whip leaps
And leads them inward.

Piebald horses
And ribald music
Circle around
A spangled lady.

III

Clowns

Clowns, Clowns and
Clowns
A firm that furthers
Nobody's business

Zanies by royal
Charter and adept
At false addition
And gay combustion

With bladders for batons
And upright eyebrows
Flappers for feet
And figs for no one.

The child's face pops
Like ginger beer
To see the air
Alive with bowlers.

Bric-a-brac
Pick-a-back
Spillbucket
Splits.

IV

Elephants

Tonnage of instinctive
Wisdom in tinsel,
Trunks like questions
And legs like tree trunks

On each forehead
A buxom blonde
And round each leg
A jangle of bells,

Deep in each brain
A chart of tropic
Swamp and twilight
Of creepered curtains,

Shamble in shoddy
Finery forward
And make their salaams
To the tiers of people—

Dummies with a reflex
Muscle of laughter
When they see the mountains
Come to Mahomet . . .

Efficacy of engines,
Obstinacy of darkness.

Homage to Clichés

With all this clamour for progress
This hammering out of new phases and gadgets, new
trinkets and phrases
I prefer the automatic, the reflex, the cliché of velvet.
The foreseen smile, sexual, maternal, or hail-fellow-met
The cat's fur sparking under your hand
And the indolent delicacy of your hand
These fish coming in to the net
I can see them coming for yards
The way that you answer, the way that you dangle your
foot
These fish that are rainbow and fat
One can catch in the hand and caress and return to the pool.
So five minutes spent at a bar
Watching the fish coming in, as you parry and shrug
This is on me or this is on me,
Or an old man momentarily sharpens a pencil as though
He were not merely licking his fur like a cat—
The cat's tongue curls to the back of its neck, the fish
swivel round by the side of their tails, on the abbey
the arrows of gold
On the pinnacles shift in the wind—
This is on me this time
Watch how your flattery logic seduction or wit
Elicit the expected response
Each tiny hammer of the abbey chime
Beating on the outer shell of the eternal bell
Which hangs like a Rameses, does not deign to move
For Mahomet comes to the mountain and the fish come to
the bell.
What will you have now? The same again?

A finger can pull these ropes,
 A gin and lime or a double Scotch
 Watch the response, the lifting wrist the clink and smile
 The fish come in, the hammered notes come out
 From a filigree gothic trap.
 These are the moments that are anaplerotic, these are the
 gifts to be accepted
 Remembering the qualification
 That everything is not true to type like these
 That the pattern and the patina of these
 Are superseded in the end.
 Stoop your head, follow me through this door
 Up the belfry stair.
 What do you see in this gloom, this womb of stone?
 I see eight bells hanging alone.
 Eight black panthers, eight silences
 On the outer shell of which our fingers via hammers
 Rapping with an impertinent precision
 Have made believe that this was the final music.
 Final as if finality was the trend of fish
 That always seek the net
 As if finality was the obvious gag
 The audience laughing in anticipation
 As if finality was the angled smile
 Drawn from the dappled stream of casual meetings
 (Yet oh thank God for such)
 But there is this much left over
 There is very much left over :
 The Rameses, the panther, the two-ton bell
 Will never move his sceptre
 Never spring, never swing
 No, no, he will never move . . .
 What will you have, my dear? The same again?

Two more double Scotch, watch the approved response
This is the preferred mode
I have shut the little window that looks up the road
Towards the tombs of the kings
For I have heard that you meet people walking in granite
I have shut up the gates under padlock
For fear of wild beasts
And I have shut my ears to the possible peal of bells,
Every precaution—
What will you have, my dear? The same again?
Count up our fag-ends
This year next year sometime never
Next year is this year, sometime is next time, never is
 sometime
Never is the Bell, Never is the Panther, Never is Rameses
Oh the cold stone panic of Never—
The ringers are taking off their coats, the panther
 crouches
The granite sceptre is very slightly inclining
As our shoes tap against the bar and our glasses
Make two new rings of wet upon the counter
Somewhere behind us stands a man, a counter
A timekeeper with a watch and a pistol
Ready to shoot and with his shot destroy
This whole delightful world of cliché and refrain—
What will you have, my dear? The same again?

On those Islands

On those islands

The west wind drops its messages of indolence
No one hurries, the Gulf Stream warms the gnarled
Rampart of gneiss, the feet of the peasant years
Pad up and down their sentry-beat not challenging
Any comer for the password—only Death
Comes through unchallenged in his general's cape.
The houses straggle on the umber moors,
The Aladdin lamp mutters in the boarded room
Where a woman smoors the fire of fragrant peat.
No one repeats the password for it is known,
All is known before it comes to the lips—
Instinctive wisdom. Over the fancy vases
The photos with the wrinkles taken out,
The enlarged portraits of the successful sons
Who married wealth in Toronto or New York,
Cajole the lonely evenings of the old
Who live embanked by memories of labour
And child-bearing and scriptural commentaries.

On those islands

The boys go poaching their ancestral rights—
The Ossianic salmon who take the yellow
Tilt of the river with a magnet's purpose—
And listen breathless to the tales at the ceilidh
Among the peat-smoke and the smells of dung
That fill the felted room from the cave of the byre.
No window opens of the windows sunk like eyes
In a four-foot wall of stones casually picked
From the knuckly hills on which these houses crawl
Like black and legless beasts who breathe in their sleep
Among the piles of peat and pooks of hay—

A brave oasis in the indifferent moors.
 And while the stories circulate like smoke,
 The sense of life spreads out from the one-eyed house
 In wider circles through the lake of night
 In which articulate man has dropped a stone—
 In wider circles round the black-faced sheep,
 Wider and fainter till they hardly crease
 The ebony heritage of the herded dead.
 On those islands
 The tinkers whom no decent girl will go with,
 Preserve the Gaelic tunes unspoiled by contact
 With the folk-fancier or the friendly tourist,
 And preserve the knowledge of horse-flesh and preserve
 The uncompromising empire of the rogue.
 On those islands
 The tethered cow grazes among the orchises
 And figures in blue calico turn by hand
 The ground beyond the plough, and the bus, not stopping,
 Drops a parcel for the lonely household
 Where men remembering stories of eviction
 Are glad to have their land though mainly stones—
 The honoured bones which still can hoist a body.
 On those islands
 There is echo of the leaping fish, the identical
 Sound that cheered the chiefs at ease from slaughter:
 There is echo of baying hounds of a lost breed
 And echo of MacCrimmon's pipes lost in the cave;
 And seals cry with the voices of the drowned.
 When men go out to fish, no one must say 'Good luck'
 And the confidences told in a boat at sea
 Must be as if printed on the white ribbon of a wave
 Withdrawn as soon as printed—so never heard.
 On those islands

The black minister paints the tour of hell
While the unregenerate drink from the bottle's neck
In gulps like gauntlets thrown at the devil's head
And spread their traditional songs across the hills
Like fraying tapestries of fights and loves,
The boar-hunt and the rope let down at night—
Lost causes and lingering home-sickness.
On those islands
The fish come singing from the drunken sea,
The herring rush the gunwales and sort themselves
To cram the expectant barrels of their own accord—
Or such is the dream of the fisherman whose wet
Leggings hang on the door as he sleeps returned
From a night when miles of net were drawn up empty.
On those islands
A girl with candid eyes goes out to marry
An independent tenant of seven acres
Who goes each year to the south to work on the roads
In order to raise a rent of forty shillings,
And all the neighbours celebrate their wedding
With drink and pipes and the walls of the barn reflect
The crazy shadows of the whooping dancers.
On those islands
Where many live on the dole or on old-age pensions
And many waste with consumption and some are drowned
And some of the old stumble in the midst of sleep
Into the pot-hole hitherto shunned in dreams
Or falling from the cliff among the shrieks of gulls
Reach the bottom before they have time to wake—
Whoever dies on the islands and however
The whole of the village goes into three day mourning,
The afflicted home is honoured and the shops are shut
For on those islands

Where a few surnames cover a host of people
And the art of being a stranger with your neighbour
Has still to be imported, death is still
No lottery ticket in a public lottery—
The result to be read on the front page of a journal—
But a family matter near to the whole family.
On those islands
Where no train runs on rails and the tyrant time
Has no clock-towers to signal people to doom
With semaphore ultimatums tick by tick,
There is still peace though not for me and not
Perhaps for long—still peace on the bevel hills
For those who still can live as their fathers lived
On those islands.

Eclogue from Iceland

Scene: The Arnarvatn Heath. Craven, Ryan and the ghost of Grettir. Voice from Europe.

- R. This is the place, Craven, the end of our way;
Hobble the horses, we have had a long day.
- C. The night is closing like a fist
And the long glacier lost in mist.
- R. Few folk come this time of year.
What are those limping steps I hear?
- C. Look, there he is coming now.
We shall have some company anyhow.
- R. It must be the mist—he looks so big;
He is walking lame in the left leg.
- G. Good evening, strangers. So you too
Are on the run? I welcome you.
I am Grettir Asmundson,
Dead many years. My day is done.
But you whose day is sputtering yet
I forget. . . . What did I say?
We forget when we are dead
The blue and red, the grey and gay.
Your day spits with a damp wick,
Will fizzle out if you're not quick.
Men have been chilled to death who kissed
Wives of mist, forgetting their own
Kind who live out of the wind.
My memory goes, goes——Tell me
Are there men now whose compass leads
Them always down forbidden roads?
Greedy young men who take their pick
Of what they want but have no luck;
Who leap the toothed and dour crevasse

- Of death on a sardonic phrase?
 You with crowsfeet round your eyes
 How are things where you come from?
- C. Things are bad. There is no room
 To move at ease, to stretch or breed—
- G. And you with the burglar's underlip
 In your land do things stand well?
- R. In my land nothing stands at all
 But some fly high and some lie low.
- G. Too many people. My memory will go,
 Lose itself in the hordes of modern people.
 Memory is words; we remember what others
 Say and record of ourselves—stones with the runes.
 Too many people—sandstorm over the words.
 Is your land also an island?
 There is only hope for people who live upon islands
 Where the Lowest Common labels will not stick
 And the unpolluted hills will hold your echo.
- R. I come from an island, Ireland, a nation
 Built upon violence and morose vendettas.
 My diehard countrymen like drayhorses
 Drag their ruin behind them.
 Shooting straight in the cause of crooked thinking
 Their greed is sugared with pretence of public
 spirit.
 From all which I am an exile.
- C. Yes, we are exiles,
 Gad the world for comfort.
 This Easter I was in Spain before the Civil War
 Gobbling the tripper's treats, the local colour,
 Storks over Avila, the coffee-coloured waters of
 Ronda,
 The comedy of the bootblacks in the cafés,

The legless beggars in the corridors of the trains
Dominoes on marble tables, the architecture
Moorish mudejar churriguerresque,
The bullfight—the banderillas like Christmas
candles,

And the scrawled hammer and sickle:
It was all copy—impenetrable surface.
I did not look for the sneer beneath the surface.
Why should I trouble, an addict to oblivion
Running away from the gods of my own hearth
With no intention of finding gods elsewhere?

R. And so we came to Iceland—

C. Our latest joyride.

G. And what have you found in Iceland?

C. What have we found? More copy, more surface,
Vignettes as they call them, dead flowers in an ✓
album—

The harmoniums in the farms, the fine-bread
and pancakes

The pot of ivy trained across the window,
Children in gumboots, girls in black berets.

R. And dead craters and angled crags.

G. The crags which saw me jockey doom for twenty
Years from one cold hide-out to another;

The last of the saga heroes

Who had not the wisdom of Njal or the beauty of
Gunnar

I was the doomed tough, disaster kept me witty;
Being born the surly jack, the ne'er-do-well, the
loiterer

Hard blows exalted me.

When the man of will and muscle achieves the
curule chair

He turns to a bully ; better is his lot as outlaw
A wad of dried fish in his belt, a snatch of bil-
berries

And riding the sullen landscape far from friends
Through the jungle of lava, dales of frozen fancy,
Fording the gletcher, ducking the hard hail,
And across the easy pastures, never stopping
To rest among the celandines and bogcotton.
Under a curse I would see eyes in the night,
Always had to move on; craving company
In the end I lived on an island with two others.
To fetch fire I swam the crinkled fjord,
The crags were alive with ravens whose low croak
Told my ears what filtered in my veins—
The sense of doom. I wore it gracefully,
The fatal clarity that would not budge
But without false pride in martyrdom. For I,
Joker and dressy, held no mystic's pose,
Not wishing to die preferred the daily goods
The horse-fight, women's thighs, a joint of meat.
But this dyspeptic age of ingrown cynics
Wakes in the morning with a coated tongue
And whets itself laboriously to labour
And wears a blasé face in the face of death.
Who risk their lives neither to fill their bellies
Nor to avenge an affront nor grab a prize
But out of bravado or to divert ennui
Driving fast cars and climbing foreign mountains.
Outside the delicatessen shop the hero
With his ribbons and his empty pinned-up sleeve
Cadges for money while with turned-up collars
His comrades blow through brass the London-
derry air

- And silken legs and swinging buttocks advertise
The sale of little cardboard flags on pins.
- G. Us too they sold
The women and the men with many sheep.
Graft and aggression, legal prevarication
Drove out the best of us,
Secured long life to only the sly and the dumb
To those who would not say what they really
thought
But got their ends through pretended indifference
And through the sweat and blood of thralls and
hacks
Cheating the poor men of their share of drift
The whale on Kaldbak in the starving winter.
- R. And so today at Grimsby men whose lives
Are warped in Arctic trawlers load and unload
The shining tons of fish to keep the lords
Of the market happy with cigars and cars.
- C. What is that music in the air—
Organ-music coming from far?
- R. Honeyed music—it sounds to me
Like the Wurlitzer in the Gaiety.
- G. I do not hear anything at all.
- C. Imagine the purple light on the stage
- R. The melting moment of a stinted age
- C. The pause before the film again
Bursts in a shower of golden rain.
- G. I do not hear anything at all.
- C. We shall be back there soon, to stand in queues
For entertainment and to work at desks,
To browse round counters of dead books, to pore
On picture catalogues and Soho menus,
To preen ourselves on the reinterpretation

- Of the words of obsolete interpreters,
 Collate delete their faded lives like texts,
 Admire Flaubert, Cézanne—the tortured artists—
 And leaning forward to knock out our pipes
 Into the fire protest that art is good
 And gives a meaning and a slant to life.
- G. The dark is falling. Soon the air
 Will stare with eyes, the stubborn ghost
 Who cursed me when I threw him. Must
 The ban go on forever? I,
 A ghost myself, have no claim now to die.
- R. Now I hear the music again—
 Strauss and roses—hear it plain.
 The sweet confetti of music falls
 From the high Corinthian capitals.
- C. Her head upon his shoulder lies. . . .
 Blend to the marrow as the music dies.
- G. Brought up to the rough-house we took offence
 quickly
 Were sticklers for pride, paid for it as outlaws—
- C. Like Cavalcanti whose hot blood lost him
 Florence
- R. Or the Wild Geese of Ireland in Mid-Europe.
 Let us thank God for valour in abstraction
 For those who go their own way, will not kiss
 The arse of law and order nor compound
 For physical comfort at the price of pride:
 Soldiers of fortune, renegade artists, rebels and
 sharpers
 Whose speech not cramped to Yea and Nay ex-
 plodes
 In crimson oaths like peonies, who brag
 Because they prefer to taunt the mask of God,

Bid him unmask and die in the living lightning.
What is that voice maundering, meandering?

VOICE. Blues . . . blues . . . high heels and manicured
hands

Always self-conscious of the vanity bag
And puritan painted lips that abnegate desire
And say 'we do not care' . . . 'we do not care'—
I don't care always in the air
Give my hips a shake always on the make
Always on the mend coming around the bend
Always on the dance with an eye to the main
Chance, always taking the floor again—

C. There was Tchekov,
His haemorrhages drove him out of Moscow
The life he loved, not born to it, who thought
That when the windows blurred with smoke and
talk

So that no-one could see out, then conversely
The giants of frost and satans of the peasant
Could not look in, impose the evil eye.

R. There was MacKenna
Spent twenty years translating Greek philosophy
Ill and tormented, unwilling to break contract,
A brilliant talker who left
The salon for the solo flight of Mind.

G. There was Onund Treefoot
Came late and lame to Iceland, made his way
Even though the land was bad and the neigh-
bours jealous

C. There was that dancer
Who danced the War, then falling into coma
Went with hunched shoulders through the ivory
gate.

- R. There was Connolly
 Vilified now by the gangs of Catholic Action.
- G. There was Egil
 Hero and miser who when dying blind
 Would have thrown his money among the crowd
 to hear
 The whole world scuffle for his hoarded gold.
- C. And there were many
 Whose commonsense or sense of humour or mere
 Desire for self assertion won them through
- R. But not to happiness. Though at intervals
 They paused in sunlight for a moment's fusion
 With friends or nature till the cynical wind
 Blew the trees pale—
- VOICE. Blues, blues, sit back, relax
 Let your self-pity swell with the music and clutch
 Your tiny lavendered fetishes. Who cares
 If floods depopulate China? I don't care
 Always in the air sitting among the stars
 Among the electric signs among the imported
 wines
 Always on the spree climbing the forbidden tree
 Tossing the peel of the apple over my shoulder
 To see it form the initials of a new intrigue
- G. Runes and runes which no-one could decode
- R. Wrong numbers on the 'phone—she never
 answered.
- C. And from the romantic grill (Spanish baroque)
 Only the eyes looked out which I see now.
- G. You see them now?
- C. But seen before as well.
- G. And many times to come, be sure of that.
- R. I know them too

C. The eyes
That glide like snakes behind a thousand
masks—
All human faces fit them, here or here:
Dictator, bullying schoolboy or common lout,
Acquisitive women, financiers, invalids,
Are capable all of that compelling stare
Stare which betrays the cosmic purposelessness ✓
The nightmare noise of the scythe upon the
hone,
Time sharpening his blade among high rocks
alone.

R. The face that fate hangs as a figurehead
Above the truncheon or the nickelled death.

G. I won the fall. Though cursed for it, I won.

C. Which is why we honour you who working from
The common premisses did not end with many
In the blind alley where the trek began.

G. Though the open road is hard with frost and dark.

VOICE. Hot towels for the men, mud packs for the
women
Will smooth the puckered minutes of your lives.
I offer you each a private window, a view
(The leper window reveals a church of lepers).

R. Do you believe him?

C. I don't know.
Do you believe him?

G. No.
You cannot argue with the eyes or voice;

- Argument will frustrate you till you die
 But go your own way, give the voice the lie,
 Outstare the inhuman eyes. That is the way.
 Go back to where you came from and do not keep
 Crossing the road to escape them, do not avoid
 the ambush,
 Take sly detours, but ride the pass direct.
- C. But the points of axes shine from the scrub, the
 odds
 Are dead against us. There are the lures of
 women
 Who, half alive, invite to a fuller life
 And never loving would be loved by others.
- R. Who fortify themselves in pasteboard castles
 And plant their beds with the cast-out toys of
 children,
 Dead pines with tinsel fruits, nursery beliefs
 And South Sea Island trinkets. Watch their years
 The permutations of lapels and gussets,
 Of stuffs—georgette or velvet or corduroy—
 Of hats and eye-veils, of shoes, lizard or suede,
 Of bracelets, milk or coral, of zip bags
 Of compacts, lipstick, eyeshade and coiffures
 All tributary to the wished ensemble
 The carriage of body that belies the soul.
- C. And there are the men who appear to be men of
 sense,
 Good company and dependable in a crisis,
 Who yet are ready to plug you as you drink
 Like dogs who bite from fear; for fear of germs
 Putting on stamps by licking the second finger,
 For fear of opinion overtipping in bars,
 For fear of thought studying stupefaction.

It is the world which these have made where
dead

Greek words sprout out in tin on sallow walls—
Clinic or polytechnic—a world of slums
Where any day now may see the Gadarene swine
Rush down the gullets of the London tubes
When the enemy, x or y, let loose their gas.

G. My friends, hounded like me, I tell you still
Go back to where you belong. I could have fled
To the Hebrides or Orkney, been rich and famous,
Preferred to assert my rights in my own country,
Mine which were hers for every country stands
By the sanctity of the individual will.

R. Yes, he is right.

C. But we have not his strength

R. Could only abase ourselves before the wall
Of shouting flesh

C. Could only offer our humble
Deaths to the unknown god, unknown but wor-
shipped,

Whose voice calls in the sirens of destroyers.

G. Minute your gesture but it must be made—
Your hazard, your act of defiance and hymn of
hate,

Hatred of hatred, assertion of human values,
Which is now your only duty.

C. Is it our only duty?

G. Yes, my friends.

What did you say? The night falls now and I
Must beat the dales to chase my remembered
acts.

Yes, my friends, it is your only duty.

And, it may be added, it is your only chance.

Eclogue Between the Motherless

What did you do for the holiday?

I went home.

What did you do?

O, I went home for the holiday.

Had a good time?

Not bad as far as it went.

What about you?

O quite a good time on the whole—

(both) Quite a good time on the whole at home for the
holiday

As far as it went—In a way it went too far,
Back to childhood, back to the backwoods mind;
I could not stand a great deal of it, bars on the
brain

And the blinds drawn in the drawingroom not to
fade the chair covers

There were no blinds drawn in ours; my father
has married again—

A girl of thirty who had never had any lovers
And wants to have everything bright

That sounds worse than us.

Our old house is just a grass-grown tumulus,
My father sits by himself with the bossed decanter,
The garden is going to rack, the gardener
Only comes three days, most of our money was in
linen

My new stepmother is wealthy, you should see her
in jodhpurs

Brisking in to breakfast from a morning canter.

I don't think he can be happy

How can you tell?

Still keeps house for yours? I suppose your sister

Still keeps house for yours?

Nothing to do in the evenings.

I can drop the ash on the carpet since my divorce.

Because one thinks one is lonely—and so one was

As a matter

The first half year

down kisses—

My dear,

My wife was warmth, a picture and a dance,

gloves

face

Might make a difference

I cannot go on any more like I was. Which is why:

What step?

I too might try what you

And after all this time

Let's start from the start.
When I went home this time there was nothing
to do
And so I got haunted. Like a ball of wool
That kittens have got at, all my growing up
✓ All the disposed-of process of my past
Unravelling on the floor—One can't proceed any
more
Except on a static past; when the ice-floe breaks
What's the good of walking? Talking of ice
I remembered my mother standing against the sky
And saying 'Go back in the house and change
your shoes'
And I kept having dreams and kept going back in
the house.
A sense of guilt like a scent—The day I was born
I suppose that that same hour was full of her
screams
You're run down
Wait till you hear what I've done.
It was not only dreams; even the crockery (odd
It's not all broken by now) and the rustic seat in
the rockery
With the bark flaked off, all kept reminding me,
binding
My feet to the floating past. In the night at the
lodge
A dog was barking as when I was little in the night
And I could not budge in the bed clothes. Lying
alone
I felt my legs were paralysed into roots
And the same cracks in what used to be the
nursery ceiling

Gave me again the feeling I was young among
 ikons,
 Helpless at the feet of faceless family idols,
 Walking the tightrope over the tiger-pit,
 Running the gauntlet of inherited fears;
 So after all these years I turned in the bed
 And grasped the want of a wife and heard in the
 rain
 On the gravel path the steps of all my mistresses
 And wondered which was coming or was she dead
 And her shoes given to the char which tapped
 through London—
 The black streets mirrored with rain and stained
 with lights.
 I dreamed she came while a train
 Was running behind the trees (with power pro-
 gressing),
 Undressing deftly she slipped cool knees beside me,
 The clipped hair on her neck prickled my tongue
 And the whole room swung like a ship till I woke
 with the window
 Jittering in its frame from the train passing the
 garden
 Carrying its load of souls to a different distance.
 And of others, isolated by associations,
 I thought—the scent of syringa or always wearing
 A hat of fine white straw and never known in
 winter—
 Splinters of memory. When I was little I sorted
 Bits of lustre and glass from the heap behind the
 henhouse;
 They are all distorted now the beautiful sirens
 Mutilated and mute in dream's dissection,

Hanged from pegs in the Bluebeard's closet of the
brain,

Never again nonchalantly to open
The doors of disillusion. Whom recording
The night marked time, the dog at the lodge kept
barking

And as he barked the big cave opened of hell
Where all their voices were one and stuck at a point
Like a gramophone needle stuck on a notched
record.

I thought 'Can I find a love beyond the family
And feed her to the bed my mother died in
Between the tallboys and the vase of honesty
On which I was born and groped my way from the
cave

With a half-eaten fruit in my hand, a passport
meaning

Enforced return for periods to that country?
Or will one's wife also belong to that country
And can one never find the perfect stranger?
My complaint was that she stayed a stranger.
I remember her mostly in the car, stopping by the
white

Moons of the petrol pumps, in a camelhair rug
Comfortable, scented and alien.

That's what I want,

Someone immutably alien—
Send me a woman with haunches out of the jungle
And frost patterns for fancies
The hard light of sun upon water in diamonds
dancing
And the brute swagger of the sea; let her love be
the drop

From the cliff of my dream, be the axe on the block
Be finesse of the ice on the panes of the heart
Be careless, be callous, be glass frolic of prisms
Be eyes of guns through lashes of barbed wire,
Be the gaoler's smile and all that breaks the past.
Odd ideals you have; all I wanted
Was to get really close but closeness was
Only a glove on the hand, alien and veinless,
And yet her empty gloves could move

My next move

Is what I've got to tell you, I picked on the only
One who would suit and wrote proposing marriage
Who is she?

But she can't have yet received it;
She is in India.

India be damned.

What is her name?

I said I cannot offer
Anything you will want

Why?

and I said

I know in two years' time it will make no difference.

I was hardly able to write it at the claw-foot
table

Where my mother kept her diary. There I sat
Concocting a gambler's medicine; the afternoon
was cool,

The ducks drew lines of white on the dull slate of
the pool

And I sat writing to someone I hardly knew
And someone I shall never know well. Relying on
that

I stuck up the envelope, walked down the winding
drive,
All that was wanted a figurehead, passed by the
lodge
Where the dog is chained and the gates, relying on
my mood
To get it posted

Who is the woman?

relying

Who is the woman?

She is dying

Dying of what?

Only a year to live

Forgive me asking

But

Only a year and ten yards down the road

I made my goal where it has always stood

Waiting for the last

You must be out of your mind;

If it were anyone else I should not mind

Waiting for the last collection before dark

The pillarbox like an exclamation mark.

Leaving Barra

The dazzle on the sea, my darling,
Leads from the western channel
A carpet of brilliance taking
My leave for ever of the island.

I never shall visit that island
✓ Again with its easy tempo—
The seal sunbathing, the circuit
Of gulls on the wing for garbage.

I go to a different garbage
And scuffle for scraps of notice,
Pretend to ignore the stigma
That stains my life and my leisure.

For fretful even in leisure
I fidget for different values,
Restless as a gull and haunted
By a hankering after Atlantis.

I do not know that Atlantis
Unseen and uncomprehended,
Dimly divined but keenly
Felt with a phantom hunger.

If only I could crush the hunger
If only I could lay the phantom
Then I should no doubt be happy
Like a fool or a dog or a buddha.

O the self-abnegation of Buddha
The belief that is disbelieving

The denial of chiaroscuro
Not giving a damn for existence!

But I would cherish existence
Loving the beast and the bubble
Loving the rain and the rainbow,
Considering philosophy alien.

For all the religions are alien
That allege that life is a fiction,
And when we agree in denial
The cock crows in the morning.

If only I could wake in the morning
And find I had learned the solution,
Wake with the knack of knowledge
Who as yet have only an inkling.

Though some facts foster the inkling—
The beauty of the moon and music,
The routine courage of the worker,
The gay endurance of women,

And you who to me among women
Stand for so much that I wish for,
I thank you, my dear, for the example
Of living like a fugue and moving.

For few are able to keep moving,
They drag and flag in the traffic;
While you are alive beyond question
Like the dazzle on the sea, my darling.

Hidden Ice

There are few songs for domesticity
For routine work, money-making or scholarship
Though these are apt for eulogy or for tragedy.

And I would praise our adaptability
Who can spend years and years in offices and beds
Every morning twirling the napkin ring,
A twitter of inconsequent vitality.

And I would praise our inconceivable stamina
Who work to the clock and calendar and maintain
The equilibrium of nerves and notions,
Our mild bravado in the face of time.

Those who ignore disarm. The domestic ambush
The pleated lampshade the defeatist clock
May never be consummated and we may never
Strike on the rock beneath the calm upholstering.

But some though buoyed by habit, though convoyed
By habitual faces and hands that help the food
Or help one with one's coat, have lost their bearings
Struck hidden ice or currents no one noted.

One was found like Judas kissing flowers
And one who sat between the clock and the sun
Lies like a Saint Sebastian full of arrows
Feathered from his own hobby, his pet hours.

Taken for Granted

Taken for granted

The household orbit in childhood
The punctual sound of the gong
The round of domestic service.

The lamps were trimmed at six,
Sticks were lavish for firewood,
The cat made bread of my knees,
The housewife shopped in the morning.

The shops were fragrant, the blistered
Vagrant peered in the windows
At tripes like deep-sea plants,
Sausages in ropes of marble.

On the knees of bountiful gods
We lived in the ease of acceptance
Taking until we were twenty
God's plenty for granted.

Thank You

Thank you, my friendly daemon, close to me as my
shadow

For the mealy buttercup days in the ancient meadow,
For the days of my 'teens, the sluice of hearing and seeing,
The days of topspin drives and physical well-being.

Thank you, my friend, shorter by a head, more placid
Than me your protégé whose ways are not so lucid,
My animal angel sure of touch and humour
With face still tanned from some primaeval summer.

Thanks for your sensual poise, your gay assurance,
Who skating on the lovely wafers of appearance
Have held my hand, put vetoes upon my reason,
Sent me to look for berries in the proper season.

Some day you will leave me or, at best, less often
I shall sense your presence when eyes and nostrils open,
Less often find your burgling fingers ready
To pick the locks when mine are too unsteady.

Thank you for the times of contact, for the glamour
Of pleasure sold by the clock and under the hammer,
Thank you for bidding for me, for breaking the cordon
Of spies and sentries round the unravished garden.

And thank you for the abandon of your giving,
For seeing in the dark, for making this life worth living.

Books, Do not Look at Me

Books, do not look at me,
Clock, do not stare;
The fire's ashes fidget,
There is sand in the air;
Drums tell its coming—
The sandstorm that blows
From the desert of darkness—
O in the desert of darkness
Where is she walking?

Otherwise regular
Quickening their beat
The marchers of madness
Pick up their feet,
Make for my table
And the empty chair
That faces me—Where,
Where and why is she absent
Leaving it empty?

Dial her number,
None will reply;
In the shrivelled world
There is only I;
Her voice is frozen,
Hangs in my brain
On the crags of memory—
O my dear, go away
From the crags of memory.

Only let it Form

Only let it form within his hands once more—
The moment cradled like a brandy glass.
Sitting alone in the empty dining hall . . .
From the chandeliers the snow begins to fall
Piling around carafes and table legs
And chokes the passage of the revolving door.
The last diner, like a ventriloquist's doll
Left by his master, gazes before him, begs:
'Only let it form within my hands once more.'

Now that the Shapes of Mist

Now that the shapes of mist like hooded beggar-children
Slink quickly along the middle of the road
And the lamps draw trails of milk in ponds of lustrous lead
I am decidedly pleased not to be dead.

Or when wet roads at night reflect the clutching
Importunate fingers of trees and windy shadows
Lunge and flounce on the windscreen as I drive
✓ I am glad of the accident of being alive.

There are so many nights with stars or close-
ly interleaved with battleship-grey or plum,
So many visitors whose Buddha-like palms are pressed
Against the windowpanes where people take their rest.

Whose favour now is yours to screen your sleep—
You need not hear the strings that are tuning for the
dawn—
Mingling, my dear, your breath with the quiet breath
Of Sleep whom the old writers called the brother of
Death.

Christmas Shopping

Spending beyond their income on gifts for Christmas—
Swing doors and crowded lifts and draperied jungles—
What shall we buy for our husbands and sons
 Different from last year?

Foxes hang by their noses behind plate glass—
Scream of macaws across festoons of paper—
Only the faces on the boxes of chocolates are free
 From boredom and crowsfeet.

Sometimes a chocolate box girl escapes in the flesh,
Lightly manoeuvres the crowd, trilling with laughter;
After a couple of years her feet and her brain will
 Tire like the others.

The great windows marshal their troops for assault on the
 purse,
Something-and-eleven the yard, hoodwinking logic,
The eleventh hour draining the gurgling pennies
 Down to the conduits

Down to the sewers of money—rats and marshgas—
Bubbling in maundering music under the pavement;
Here go the hours of routine, the weight on our eyelids—
 Pennies on corpses’.

While over the street in the centrally heated public
Library dwindling figures with sloping shoulders
And hands in pockets, weighted in the boots like chess-
 men,
 Stare at the printed

Columns of ads, the quickset road to riches,
Starting at a little and temporary but once we're
Started who knows whether we shan't continue,
Salaries rising,

Rising like a salmon against the bullnecked river,
Bound for the spawning-ground of care-free days—
Good for a fling before the golden wheels run
Down to a standstill.

And Christ is born—The nursery glad with baubles,
Alive with light and washable paint and children's
Eyes expects as its due the accidental
Loot of a system.

Smell of the South—oranges in silver paper,
Dates and ginger, the benison of firelight,
The blue flames dancing round the brandied raisins,
Smiles from above them,

Hands from above them as of gods but really
These their parents, always seen from below, them-
Selves are always anxious looking across the
Fence to the future—

Out there lies the future gathering quickly
Its blank momentum; through the tubes of London
The dead winds blow the crowds like beasts in flight from
Fire in the forest.

The little firtrees palpitate with candles
In hundreds of chattering households where the suburb
Straggles like nervous handwriting, the margin
Blotted with smokestacks.

Further out on the coast the lighthouse moves its
Arms of light through the fog that wads our welfare,
Moves its arms like a giant at Swedish drill whose
Mind is a vacuum. .

Bagpipe Music

It's no go the merrygoround, it's no go the rickshaw,
All we want is a limousine and a ticket for the peepshow.
Their knickers are made of crêpe-de-chine, their shoes are
made of python,
Their halls are lined with tiger rugs and their walls with
heads of bison.

John MacDonald found a corpse, put it under the sofa,
Waited till it came to life and hit it with a poker,
Sold its eyes for souvenirs, sold its blood for whiskey,
Kept its bones for dumb-bells to use when he was fifty.

It's no go the Yogi-Man, it's no go Blavatsky,
All we want is a bank balance and a bit of skirt in a
taxi.

Annie MacDougall went to milk, caught her foot in the
heather,
Woke to hear a dance record playing of Old Vienna.
It's no go your maidenheads, it's no go your culture,
All we want is a Dunlop tyre and the devil mend the
puncture.

The Laird o' Phelps spent Hogmanay declaring he was
sober,
Counted his feet to prove the fact and found he had one
foot over.
Mrs. Carmichael had her fifth, looked at the job with
repulsion,
Said to the midwife 'Take it away; I'm through with
over-production'.

It's no go the gossip column, it's no go the Ceilidh,
All we want is a mother's help and a sugar-stick for the
baby.

Willie Murray cut his thumb, couldn't count the damage,
Took the hide of an Ayrshire cow and used it for a
bandage.

His brother caught three hundred cran when the seas
were lavish,
Threw the bleeders back in the sea and went upon the
parish.

It's no go the Herring Board, it's no go the Bible,
All we want is a packet of fags when our hands are idle.

It's no go the picture palace, it's no go the stadium,
It's no go the country cot with a pot of pink geraniums.
It's no go the Government grants, it's no go the elections,
Sit on your arse for fifty years and hang your hat on a
pension.

It's no go my honey love, it's no go my poppet;
Work your hands from day to day, the winds will blow the
profit.
The glass is falling hour by hour, the glass will fall for
ever,
But if you break the bloody glass you won't hold up the
weather.

Rugby Football Excursion

Euston—the smell of soot and fish and petrol;
Then in the train jogging and jogging,
The sheaf of wires from pole to pole beside us
Dogging the fancy northward

And waking to board the *Hibernia*—Bass and Guinness,
Bull-necks and brogues and favours
And Kerry-coloured girls; the whole excursion
Savours of twelve years back

Back to my adolescence, back to Ireland,
'Ilkla Moor ba't a't' from Midland voices,
And Wicklow apricot in early sunshine
Rejoices what was jaded.

Horse-cabs and outside cars—the ballyhoo for trippers—
And College Park reposeful behind the railings;
Emphatic old ladies' voices in a lounge lamenting
Failings of health and budgets.

Lansdowne Road—the swirl of faces, flags,
Gilbert and Sullivan music, emerald jerseys;
Spire and crane beyond remind the mind on furlough
Of Mersey's code and Rome's.

Eccentric scoring—Nicholson, Marshall and Unwin,
Replies by Bailey and Daly;
Rugs around our shins, the effortless place-kick
Gaily carving the goalposts.

Then tea and toast with Fellows and Bishops in a huge
Regency room in the warmth of a classic assurance

Looking on Stephen's Green where they blew up George
the Second—

Endurance of one-way thinking.

And then a walk through Dublin down the great
Grey streets broad and straight and drowned in twilight,
Statues of poets and Anglo-Irish patriots—
High lights of merged traditions.

Junkshops, the smell of poverty, pubs at the corner,
A chimney on fire and street on street of broken
Fanlights over the doors of tenement houses—
Token of the days of Reason.

In a frame from Sir Isaac Newton the dusk of Ireland
Bathes the children whipping their tops on the cobbles
Or swinging by ropes from a lamp post while a cripple
Hobbles like a Hogarth sketch.

These I must leave, rejoin the beery trippers
Whose other days prefer today delirious
Packing the bar on the boat, while a sapphire pinhead
Sirius marks Dun Laoghaire.

Epilogue

For W. H. Auden

Now the winter nights begin
Lonely comfort walls me in;
So before the memory slip
I review our Iceland trip—

Not for me romantic nor
Idyll on a mythic shore
But a fancy turn, you know,
Sandwiched in a graver show.

Down in Europe Seville fell,
Nations germinating hell,
The Olympic games were run—
Spots upon the Aryan sun.

And the don in me set forth
How the landscape of the north
Had educed the saga style
Plodding forward mile by mile.

And the don in you replied
That the North begins inside,
Our ascetic guts require
Breathers from the Latin fire.

So although no ghost was scotched
We were happy while we watched
Ravens from their walls of shale
Cruise around the rotting whale,

Watched the sulphur basins boil,
‘Loops of steam uncoil and coil,
While the valley fades away
To a sketch of Judgment Day.

So we rode and joked and smoked
With no miracles evoked,
With no levitations won
In the thin unreal sun;

In that island never found
Visions blossom from the ground,
No conversions like St. Paul,
No great happenings at all.

Holidays should be like this,
Free from over-emphasis,
Time for soul to stretch and spit
Before the world comes back on it,

Before the chimneys row on row
Sneer in smoke, ‘We told you so’
And the fog-bound sirens call
Ruin to the long sea-wall.

Rows of books around me stand,
Fence me round on either hand;
Through that forest of dead words
I would hunt the living birds—

Great black birds that fly alone
Slowly through a land of stone,
And the gulls who weave a free
Quilt of rhythm on the sea.

Here in Hampstead I sit late
Nights which no one shares and wait
For the 'phone to ring or for
Unknown angels at the door;

Better were the northern skies
Than this desert in disguise—
Rugs and cushions and the long
Mirror which repeats the song.

For the litany of doubt
From these walls comes breathing out
Till the room becomes a pit
Humming with the fear of it

With the fear of loneliness
And uncommunicableness;
All the wires are cut, my friends
Live beyond the severed ends.

So I write these lines for you
Who have felt the death-wish too,
But your lust for life prevails—
Drinking coffee, telling tales.

Our prerogatives as men
Will be cancelled who knows when ;
Still I drink your health before
The gun-butt raps upon the door.

